Dear Joan,

As you know, the current pandemic crisis has come as a massive blow to many sectors of the media which were already in a precarious position before the coronavirus threat emerged. Many of the economic models which used to support the presence of professional journalism in our society are no longer working; and now, with newsagents closed, print newspaper sales plummeting, and advertising revenue in free-fall, those trends are being dramatically accelerated.

Modern nations and communities arguably cease to exist, psychologically and politically, when they have no distinctive media in which to hold a well-informed national or local conversation about the decisions they face; yet so far as print media titles are concerned, that is the prospect now facing both many local communities, and the three smaller nations of the UK. The ability of Scotland’s national titles to cover Scottish politics, arts, sports and public and civic life has already been decimated by years of editorial cuts; and many local newspapers have all but ceased to be produced locally, in any meaningful sense of the term. And this despite the fact that everyone in public life is keenly aware of the key role played by media in informing citizens about the public life of their town, region, or nation; and of the danger of disinformation, disengagement and poor democratic decision-making which can follow a breakdown of serious professional news-gathering and presentation.

The NUJ believes that to prevent a historic collapse of professional media coverage following the Covid crisis, new policy initiatives should be considered now, and put in place with some urgency. In order to secure the future of high-quality journalism in Scotland, and to offer a positive contribution to the growing global debate on the future of serious journalism in an age of “fake news”, we would therefore ask that the Scottish Government and other relevant agencies consider the following positive suggestions for a new media policy. They are based on the NUJ’s News Recovery Plan for the UK and Ireland, published in April 2020.

1. To seek to persuade governments at all appropriate levels to introduce a substantial windfall tax on “tech giant” companies, using means such as the Digital Services Tax, sufficient to help fund a News Recovery Plan, and continuing support for high-quality independent journalism.

2. To consider the establishment of a government-funded Journalism Foundation - as recommended in the UK’s Cairncross Review - to invest in local journalism, innovative media projects, and vital areas of quality and investigative journalism which are no longer supported elsewhere.
3. To confer “asset of community value” status on local newspapers, ensuring that titles facing closure, or potential sale to owners who fund little local content, are preserved for potential community ownership.

4. To offer rate relief and other financial support for journalistic co-operatives and local social enterprises taking over titles from major commercial operators, and running them as not-for-profit enterprises.

5. To ensure that government advertising is strategically invested in innovative journalism and local and hyperlocal news initiatives, as well as in mainstream media.

6. To consider a news voucher system, particularly for young citizens aged between 16 and 19, to encourage them to engage with the news sources available, and to make informed decisions about them. Such a scheme could be combined with a programme of media literacy education in schools, designed to prepare young people for their role as media consumers.

Yours with best wishes,

Joyce McMillan
Chair
NUJ Edinburgh Freelance Branch
Dear Cabinet Secretary,

NUJ News Recovery Plan for Scotland, 2020

Thank you very much, first of all, for your interest over the years in the future of high-quality journalism in Scotland, and for your past contributions to the debate. As you may know, in April the National Union of Journalists, representing journalists across the UK and Ireland, published a news recovery plan, designed to put forward policies which the NUJ believes will help to secure a future for serious journalism after the shock of the Covid-19 crisis, which, as you will be aware, has had a profound impact both on sales of print newspapers, and on advertising revenue, with major redundancies announced at Reach, owners of many Scottish local newspapers as well as of the Daily Record and Sunday Mail, just last week. You can find a link to a summary of the original NUJ News Recovery Plan here. https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-launches-news-recovery-plan/

In trying to further the debate on the future of journalism, the NUJ Edinburgh Freelance Branch - with the support of the Union’s Scottish Office in Glasgow - put together a short document highlighting the areas of most interest from a Scottish perspective, which we have since been discussing with interested MSP’s of all parties, and with other expert advisors on the future of journalism. We would now be most grateful for an opportunity to discuss these ideas further with you. In particular, we would like to explore the following points:

1) The possible setting up of a Journalism Foundation for Scotland with a specific remit to support journalism in Scotland, notably local news, investigative reporting, other areas of journalism which have suffered under recent failing business models, and education about the role of journalism in a thriving democracy. We have found substantial support for this idea during our discussions, and we would like to share with you some of the thoughts that have emerged about the possible funding and governance of such a body.

2) The strengthening of legislative and other support available for co-operatives, staff or community groups seeking to buy out titles, particularly local newspaper titles, which seem likely to close, or to launch new news projects at community level. This could involve schemes under the provisions of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, which might enable communities to act to take over valued local titles which are under threat, or to start up new community news initiatives.

3) Moves to ensure that government and public advertising - which has played such a key role during the current pandemic - is strategically invested in innovative journalism and local and hyperlocal news initiatives, as well as in mainstream media.
4) The idea of a voucher scheme for young Scots aged between 16 and 19, designed to raise their awareness of their active role as media consumers, and to motivate them, while they are still in education or training, to learn more about the media available.

We would be delighted if you would be willing to join us for a short online meeting to discuss these ideas, and how we can best take them forward. We look forward to hearing from you, while appreciating that there are many calls on your time at the moment, and thank you very much for your attention.

Yours with best wishes,

Joyce McMillan
Chair
NUJ Edinburgh Freelance Branch